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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: social integration

Submitted by: Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Responding to climate change: striving for inclusive societies in a divided world

1. In 2008, at the Helsinki expert group meeting, social integration was generally accepted by the participants as "the process of promoting the values, relations and institutions that enable all people to participate in social, economic and political life on the basis of equality of rights, equity and dignity".[1] Based on this view, approaches to achieving social inclusion have taken into account social, cultural, economic and political factors to determine what facilitates and what obstructs movement towards a socially inclusive and cohesive society. Generally unrecognized and unnamed in these approaches, however, are environmental factors, specifically the degradation brought on by human-induced climate change, which provides the background for the unfolding global financial and economic crisis[2] and which is now a recognized threat to human security and the sustainability of the Earth community.

Climate change and social development

2. Climate change is considered the defining human development issue of our generation, a cross-cutting issue with the potential to obstruct efforts to implement the Millennium Development Goals.[3] For example:

Millennium Development Goal 1 aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; however, climate change is:

- Expected to change the path and rate of economic growth, thus increasing poverty through reduced income opportunities;
- Projected to alter regional food security, especially in Africa, where food security is expected to worsen.

Millennium Development Goal 2 aims to achieve universal primary education; however, owing to climate change,

- Loss of livelihood assets, natural disasters and displacement reduce educational opportunities.

Millennium Development Goals 4, 5 and 6 are health-related, aiming to combat major diseases, reduce infant mortality and improve maternal health; however, climate change increases:

- Heat-related mortality and illness;

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[1] Draft summary of the Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Social Integration, held in Helsinki from 8 to 10 July 2008, available from www.un.org/esa/socdev/social/meetings/egm6_social_integration.

[2] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2009, Supplement No. 6* (E/2009/26), annex I (Chairperson's summary of the forty-seventh session of the Commission for Social Development).

[3] See United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2007/2008: Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World* (United Nations Development Programme, 2007).

- The prevalence of vector-borne diseases which especially affect pregnant women and children.[4]

3. By hampering efforts to deliver on the promise of the Millennium Development Goals, climate change undermines attempts to eradicate poverty. It leads to a future in which progress in social development, i.e., in health care, nutrition, education and other areas, built up over generations will be reversed and the poorest 40 per cent of the world's citizens consigned to even greater poverty and diminished opportunity.[3]

Climate change and human rights

4. On 28 March 2008 the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted, by consensus, resolution 7/23 on human rights and climate change, which was co-sponsored by 69 countries. In the resolution, the Council expressed its concern that climate change posed an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world and had implications for the full enjoyment of human rights. Indeed, climate change is set to undermine basic human rights on a massive scale, with the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups particularly at risk.[5] For example, the following rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would be undermined:

- Right to life: survival, security and health (article 3);
- Right to sources of livelihood: food, water, energy, shelter and economic security (article 25);
- Right to participation: decision-making opportunities and information (articles 21 and 27);
- Right to capacity development: education and income generation opportunities (articles 23 and 26)

Thus, climate change is in direct opposition to social integration policies that promote and protect human rights.[2]

Climate change and social cohesion

> "Social integration is a process that strengthens the cohesion of societies .... Cohesion increases security in its comprehensive meaning."[2]

5. While social integration promotes a cohesive society through the inclusion of all, civil conflict interferes with this process, creating conditions that lead to social destabilization.

6. It is recognized that climate change is not the sole cause of violent conflicts, which may be the result of a variety of socio-economic factors, but it does serve as a trigger in the face of scarce resources, such as water or arable land. It may also

[4] African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, Department for International Development (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and others, "Poverty and climate change: reducing the vulnerability of the poor through adaptation", joint paper, available from www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/27/2502872.pdf.

[5] "Climate wrongs and human rights: putting people at the heart of climate-change policy", OXFAM briefing paper, 2008, available from www.oxfam.org/en/policy/bp117-climate-wrongs-and-human-rights.

ignite conflict where resource competition between local and resettled populations, in the case of climate-induced migration, worsens pre-existing ethnic or social tensions.[6]

7. Besides destabilizing social institutions, civil conflict further degrades Earth's life support systems, thus exacerbating the consequences of climate change and adding to the threats to human security brought on by violent conflict. For example, groundwater supplies upon which 1.5 million Palestinians depend for drinking and agriculture are in danger of imminent collapse as a result of protracted conflict in the area.[7]

8. While there is no consensus that climate change drives violent conflict, it is now identified by States as a security concern because of its direct impact on local institutions in areas challenged by environmental degradation.[6]

9. It should also be recognized as central to policymaking and policy implementation for socially inclusive and cohesive societies.

Climate change and social inclusion

10. By undermining attempts to eradicate poverty, violating human rights and destabilizing societies through civil conflict, climate change is a threat to human security.

11. It renders people living in poverty even more vulnerable to social, economic and environmental stresses in their societies and less resilient, i.e., less capable of dealing with these stresses and of rising out of the conditions of poverty in which they live.

12. In this way, climate change and its multiple manifestations exacerbate social inequalities, contributing to the maintenance of social exclusion and serving as an obstacle to the achievement of socially inclusive and cohesive societies.

A moral imperative

13. There are two constituencies with no political voice that are especially threatened by climate change, which makes action to cope with it a moral imperative:

Persons who are living in poverty

This marginalized and excluded group, 70 per cent of whom are women, are on the front lines of climate change, whether in the Sudan, Bangladesh, the United States of America (e.g., New Orleans) or Australia. They bear the brunt of its manifestations, for which they are not mainly responsible.

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[6] Jennifer Wallace, "The security dimensions of climate change", in *State of the World: Into a Warming World*, Worldwatch Institute, ed. (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

[7] Message of the Secretary-General on the occasion of the 2009 International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict (6 November), available from www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sgsm12578.doc.htm.

Future generations

While people living in poverty suffer the consequences of climate change today, in the future no one will escape. Our grandchildren, their children and grandchildren, indeed members of all social groups, will have no alternative but to try to adapt to them.

Taking climate change into account in efforts to promote an inclusive and cohesive society therefore is not simply a matter of adopting a more comprehensive approach in the hope of better outcomes to achieving social inclusion, however laudable the goal. It is a matter of social justice and intergenerational equity.

Recommendations

New thinking

> "Climate change is different from other problems facing humanity — and it challenges us to think differently at many levels."[3]

14. Given the impending threat to human security and the sustainability of our Earth community presented by climate change, if we are to move forward in developing and implementing policy for achieving an inclusive and cohesive society, it is necessary, first of all, to recognize the long-term predicament that climate change presents and then to move beyond a way of thinking limited to socio-economic factors to one that is holistic and integrated. Such integrated thinking would recognize that:

- We are a part of a socially and ecologically interdependent community;
- There is an interplay between the social and ecological dimensions, e.g., poverty and climate change; one leads to the other in a cyclical fashion;
- Climate change has social, economic and environmental impacts, all of which must be addressed in policymaking for social inclusion;
- Efforts to respond to these impacts, i.e., socially sustainable development and poverty eradication, are mutually supportive goals.

Resilient social development

15. The reduction of poverty and the eradication of core poverty are central to achieving social integration. Given that the climate crisis is a backdrop to such efforts and the fact that it will increasingly affect the poor, efforts must be made to help people living in poverty adapt to its consequences, i.e., to be less vulnerable and more resilient.

Recommendation 1

Integrated thinking, as outlined above, should be an overarching principle guiding policy development and implementation by all Governments.

Recommendation 2

Governments should incorporate adaptation to climate change, especially as this applies to education, health services and job creation, into strategies for poverty reduction and eradication. These strategies must aim to reduce the vulnerability of

people living in poverty to current and future risks and to increase the resilience with which people living in poverty respond to those risks.

Recommendation 3

Governments should build into policy development and implementation an environmental assessment of the policy's impact on current and future generations to ensure resilient and sustainable social development of their peoples.

Note: The present statement was written by members of the non-governmental organization Committee for Social Development's working group on poverty and climate change, the International Peace Research Association, the Sisters of Charity Federation and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. The present statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council:

Baha'i International Community
Carmelite NGO
Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants
Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul
Congregation of Notre Dame
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd
Congregations of St. Joseph
Dominican Leadership Conference
Grail
International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Loretto Community
Salesian Missions
School Sisters of Notre Dame
Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries
UNANIMA International
VIVAT International